

An in-depth literature review of the relational turbulence model

by

Thomas R. Weeks II

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Approved by:

Major Professor  
Dr. Natalie Pennington

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## **Abstract**

Interpersonal conflict is common before; during and after romantic relationships develop. A structured framework is needed to understand the causes, implications, and contexts of interpersonal conflict within interpersonal relationships. This in-depth literature review of current scholarly work is compiled to provide a roadmap for understanding the Relational Turbulence Model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) and the contexts that have been studied using this framework. Also provided is a discussion of future directions for scholars to pursue and advance the application of the model, with the hope that future scholars will pick up where others have left off, expanding on what is known about interpersonal conflict generally, communication processes, and relational turbulence specifically.

**Keywords: Interpersonal Conflict, Uncertainty, Interference, Relational Turbulence Model**

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## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

Conflict typically is a result of competing goals between individuals within relationships (Hocker & Wilmont, 2014). In particular, competing goals in romantic relationships may include: saving for retirement or going on vacation, living near family or moving to pursue a career, making choices about the best treatment for medical conditions, and domestic labor, to name a few. While conflict is not inherently problematic, failing to resolve conflict can have negative consequences for those involved (Solomon & Thesis, 2008). The inability to resolve conflict can lead to many mental and physical health issues such as: depression, anxiety, relational abuse, stress, and alcoholism (Hocker & Wilmont, 2014). Conflict can reduce relationship satisfaction and commitment when a romantic relationship is in flux and the partners are more reactive to communication from their partner (McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2012). Although to date conflict has been studied in a variety of ways, it is necessary to continue to monitor and extend this research to improve our understanding and offer advice to positively influence interpersonal, and more specifically, romantic relationships. It is through communication research that we learn about conflict, relationships, and the processes of relationships.

An important line of interpersonal relationship research is the management of relationship altering events, which may be the cause of or lead to conflict. Siegert and Stamp (1994) described the “first big fight” as one of these events that can have negative implications if the management of the event is not handled with care, such as: negative communication, increased conflict, increased uncertainty, and relationship termination. Within the stages of relationship development, “the first big fight” has been shown to

have implications that effect the life of the relationship (Siegert & Stamp, 1994).

Research by Afifi and Metts (1998) also found that negative expectancy violations within relationships can lead to instability. As individuals work to develop and maintain their relationships, management of expectations can play a major role in the success of the relationship. Another example of a relationship-altering event that can be detrimental to relationships is physical separation (Baxter & Pittman, 2001). While the long-held belief that long-distance relationships are inferior has in many ways been debunked (Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Stafford & Merolla, 2007), there are unique challenges associated with being physically separated from a significant other. Physical distance between romantic relationship requires the couple to find alternative ways to communicate and maintain their relationship. Also, conflict escalation is especially concerning when discussing problematic events in interpersonal relationships because conflict escalation happens so frequently.

Conflict escalation is the communicative process of a conflict starting as a small or minor issue and growing to a point that is potentially damaging to a relationship (Hocker & Wilmot, 2014). Physical separation, conflict escalation, and changes in the environment of the relationship are all concerns for interpersonal scholars (Samp & Solomon, 1998; Surra, 1987). As a result, failure to properly manage relationship-altering events can lead to dissatisfied individuals or in some cases, the termination of the relationship.

One way to improve the everyday life of an individual is to provide communication education and valuable information on interpersonal conflict. This paper dives deep into the very specific context of relationship development and maintenance that is relational



turbulence. Relational turbulence is defined more extensively in later chapters, but in brief, it refers to changes that occur in relationships that may cause friction for one or both partners (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b). Couples can experience a change in their relationship at any stage of life. More specifically, a change or transition is also known as a turning point; a shift in the state of the relationship or the lives of one of the partners that inadvertently influences the relationship (Baxter & Pittman, 2001). This is not a one-time event but a relationship-altering event. A few examples of transitions that can cause turbulence include but are not limited to: a couple deciding to escalate a dating relationship to marriage (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001), or one partner getting diagnosed with a significant medical condition (Weber & Solomon, 2008). These changes in relationships are not inherently bad, but can lead to shifts in relationship characteristics that include relational uncertainty and partner interference based on the way they are discussed, which may cause negative communication, dissatisfaction, or relationship termination (McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2012; Solomon & Theiss, 2008).

Understanding how individuals communicate during difficult transitions is vital to promoting healthy relationships. This paper provides a discussion of the development of the Relational Turbulence Model (RTM) and how it has been applied over the last decade and a half. RTM allows scholars, practitioners, and educators to explain and predict communication behaviors related to relationship transitions. The purpose of this review of scholarly work is to discuss the foundation of current knowledge on the RTM and suggest ways to extend understanding through future research. First, in chapter two, this paper will describe the foundation of RTM research, turning points, and the primary tenants of the RTM. Then, chapter three includes information on future directions for

additional research extending the contexts of relational turbulence. Finally, a closing chapter is included that discusses the practical and methodological implications of RTM research for both scholars and clinicians to provide training and education for those who may be impacted by relational turbulence.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

### **Turning Points in Relationships**

As a relationship develops there can exist periods of increased pressure; this pressure changes the relationship in some way, and has been called a “turning point” in existing literature (Baxter & Pittman, 2001). This relational change may be positive or negative but a negative change may lead to increased conflict (Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). Turning point research suggests that relationship development is an unstable or turbulent process (Baxter & Erbert, 1999). When couples were asked to think about the major transitions that have occurred in the development of their relationship they spoke about the pivotal moments or “turning points” (Baxter & Pittman, 2001). Examples include: celebrations, memories, storytelling, idiomatic communication, and gifts. While turning points, more traditionally, may be viewed as pressure points on the relationship, as noted in the introduction chapter, transitions for the individual or couple within the relationship can also be viewed as turning points (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Specifically, in addition to storytelling or celebrations, turbulent transitions should also be considered as relationship-altering events. The next step after understanding these specific moments in relational history is to explore how they fit together across time. In other words, the outcomes of turning points and the lived experiences of the individuals in these

relationships needed to be explained; what is the process of turbulence like when one experiences a turning point? Does relational communication change during a transition, and if so, how?

This turbulent process of relationship development has been studied through the lens of what is called the relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Relationships may generally be in a state of flux where one or the other partner is leaning towards development or dissolution versus maintenance. Maintenance can exist for a couple who has not yet become engaged but has not yet decided that this is a conversation they need to have. When the couple decides to take that next step toward marriage they switch away from a state of maintenance and back into development. For a period, the relationship stays in the development stage until it levels off and everyday life feels “normal” again. Each next step or stage in a relationship has the possibility to cause friction between the individuals (e.g., casual dating, moving in-together, getting engaged, getting married). One indicator of relationship development is relational uncertainty, which is also connected to other relational constructs noted in existing literature such as: shared social networks, relational violations, and, importantly, relational turning points (Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001). Relational uncertainty is studied within the RTM in conjunction with partner interference and intimacy as relationship characteristics to better understand relationship outcomes in times of transition. For example, if one partner is ready for the next step but does not know if their partner is (uncertainty) they may hold back or avoid the topic all together, and likewise if the partner says or does something that would seem inconsistent with a shift (interference) it may also lead to turbulence and decreased relationship satisfaction within the relationship (Solomon, 2016).

## **Relational Turbulence Model**

The relationship turbulence model (RTM) suggests that couples in transition will experience emotions more intensely during a transitional period of the relationship than if the transition had not occurred (King & Theiss, 2016; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). This means that a minor irritant can, “polarize people’s cognitive, emotional, and communicative reactions to relationship experiences” (Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, & McLaren, 2016, p. 507). A minor irritant can be thought of as any communication between partners that would have gone relatively unnoticed if the transition had not occurred. This is difficult because as relationships develop, people intertwine their lives and they open themselves up to interference of their daily goals from the other person and the future of the relationship is unknown. The focus of the existing research on the RTM is twofold: the outcomes of relationships during transitions and communication associated with the transition.

RTM draws on Burscheid’s (1983) work on interdependence and Berger’s (1988) accounts of uncertainty to establish its core tenants. The function of the relational turbulence model (RTM) is to highlight the difficulties of changes in relationships (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Solomon et al., 2016; Theiss & Solomon, 2006a). This model is important because it can identify potential challenges couples may face when their relationships change. The information derived from this model is particularly applicable for couples facing challenging situations, as well as therapists and mediators working with couples.

The two primary tenants of RTM are partner interference and relational uncertainty, both of which lead to a greater intensity of emotion, communicative responses to a

significant other, and conflict in the relationship during times of transition (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Solomon, 2006b). This means that for the model to predict and explain conflict within a romantic relational transition, one or both elements need to be present. For example, partner interference in the daily life of the other person and relational uncertainty, in the sense that one person is unsure about where they want the relationship to go, how the other partner wants the relationship to develop, or the relationship's trajectory.

Per Knobloch, Miller, and Carpenter (2007), romantic partners experience relational turbulence as intimacy increases in their relationship. The feeling a person has about how connected they are to their partner is known as intimacy (Knobloch et al., p. 92). This means that as relationships change there is potential to experience negative communication, because as individuals become more interconnected, this may impact the success of the relationship (Knobloch et al.). It is important to note here, that interconnectedness or intimacy is not the focus but the process of becoming more interconnected is associated with increased relational turbulence (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). RTM focuses on specific relational transitions and does not attempt to predict relationship outcomes over the duration of the relationship.

At this point in the report, it is important to note the difference between RTM and the recently developed Relational Turbulence Theory (Solomon et al., 2016). The original authors in their advancement of the relational turbulence model into a theory distinguish the two by noting that "a model depicts associations between phenomena without necessarily identifying the processes that give rise to them; a theory explains relationships in terms of generative mechanisms" (Solomon et al., p. 508). In this case,

RTM discusses the relationship between relational uncertainty and partner interference as they relate to times of turbulence. Relational turbulence theory (RTT) seeks to explain how uncertainty and interference can lead to specific behaviors, actions, and emotions, highlighting instances of turbulence. This report focuses solely on RTM as the foundational argument that has been tested for the last decade and a half. This is important because the simplicity of the model is more accessible to those outside of academia. This allows for a more practical application of the research. The following sections will unpack both relational uncertainty and partner interference as the two major variables of the model and their connection to communication behaviors.

### **Relational Uncertainty**

Relational uncertainty is the amount of confusion people have about their relationships status (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Depending on the type and level of uncertainty within the relationship, couples may change when and how they communicate. Within RTM, relational uncertainty is composed of three related sources of friction: self-uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty. In other words, uncertainty is based on the individual's feelings about the relationship (self), the individual's perception of their partner's feelings of the relationship (partner), and an individual's evaluation of the relationship. It has also been found that things like money (or lack thereof), job changes, children and even relatives can be sources of uncertainty for married individuals (Knobloch, 2008b). Uncertainty can also exist for those who have not yet married; someone may be uncertain if they want to continue their relationship, or they may believe their partner no longer wants to be in the relationship, or might think the relationship is never going to work. Uncertainty was described by Knobloch (2008a)

like the experience of not knowing what is down river on a canoe trip that changes from smooth and calm to rough and choppy. The waters may subside or they may become too dangerous to navigate. To fully understand relational uncertainty, in the following section each of the three types of relational uncertainty are discussed.

First, self-uncertainty is the way people feel about their own behavior in the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). This is an index of how invested people feel in the relationship. For example, someone might think to themselves, “How badly do I want to be in this relationship?” Metaphorically, in line with the previous example, when the water becomes choppy and a canoer starts second-guess their abilities and to rethink the trip, they experience self-uncertainty (Knobloch, 2008a). Self-uncertainty was operationalized as a level of certainty about a relationship (Knobloch and Solomon, 1999). Questions were asked to measure this on a scale of one to five (1 = absolutely uncertain, 5 = absolutely certain) and included items such as: “How you feel about your relationship?”

Second, partner uncertainty is the doubt people have about individuals they are in relationships with (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). This degree of confidence the individual has is important for their relationship with their partner. Again, if two people are canoeing down a river that suddenly becomes choppy and one begins to worry that the other will turn around and leave them, they are experiencing partner uncertainty (Knobloch, 2008a). Partner uncertainty was operationalized as a level of certainty your partner has for the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Questions were asked to measure this on a scale of one to five (1 = absolutely uncertain, 5 = absolutely certain) and included items such as: “How your

partner feels about the relationship?”

Finally, relationship uncertainty is an evaluation of the dyad as parts of a whole (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). This is different from the previous two because it is about how certain an individual is about the status of the relationship. Like the previous example, when individuals are heading down a river together, their perception of their safety is similar to their relationship certainty (Knobloch, 2008a). Relationship uncertainty was operationalized as a level on uncertainty an individual has about the status of their relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Questions were asked to measure this on a scale of one to five (1 = completely uncertain, 5 = completely certain) and included items such as: “What is the current status of your relationship?”

In this way, people reevaluate themselves, the other person, and the relationship because of changes in their own levels of confidence within a relationship. Uncertainty builds like a snowball rolling on the ground. It starts with partner uncertainty or self-uncertainty, which in turn often grows into relationship uncertainty (Knobloch et al., 2001; Solomon, 2015). From this, we can learn the stages of relationship uncertainty and prepare for them within relationships. For example, couples may be advised to discuss their concerns with a therapist to prevent relational uncertainty. Or a friend may remind another to express affection to a significant other to limit their partner uncertainty. Looking for and finding value in a romantic relationship may help to reduce self-uncertainty. It is through the communication process that change can occur, either before it starts, or during the transition. In the end, we can see that uncertainty can have major impacts on relationships because it causes people to second guess themselves, the other



person, and the relationship. In addition to relational uncertainty, partner interference is a cause of relational strain.

### **Partner Interference**

The model defines partner interference as the disruption of daily activities by a partner in a romantic relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004, p. 798). Examples of interference include: interrupting time spent with friends, spending money, failing to clean the house, inhibiting time spent on school work, or any other daily activity the individual would like to do (Theiss & Solomon, 2006). Interference increases at low levels of intimacy and begins to decrease at higher levels of intimacy (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004). The opposite of interference is facilitation; this is when a couple works together to accomplish goals. As intimacy increases so does facilitation in romantic relationships (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004).

Interference can occur when there are higher levels of intimacy as well, however. RTM argues that couples establish and re-establish their interdependence with each turning point in their life (Knobloch, 2008a). From the initiation of the relationship to the youngest child moving out of the house, as the couple's situation changes so does their level of interdependence (Knobloch, 2008a). Transitioning from two independent individuals to relational interdependence is a choppy process, which involves incorporating each other into one life, and this can be a complex and difficult process (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). For example, when a partner leaves for deployment (Knobloch et al., 2013), or a partner is diagnosed with cancer or depression (Knobloch & Delaney, 2012; Weber & Solomon, 2008), the couple must work to re-establish their interdependence. In this process, individuals may help (facilitation) or limit (interference)

their partner in their ability to achieve their goals.

Partner interference has many negative consequences for the relationship, including the potential to judge irritations more harshly (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) and for hurtful events to be perceived as more intentional (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b). Individuals experiencing partner interference also perceive the relationship as more problematic (Knobloch, 2007; McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2011). Interference, while more likely when intimacy is low or when relationships are new, can still occur in high intimacy relationships due to turbulence caused by turning-points.

Overall, partner interference can happen during the relationship escalation process as well as any other relationship transition. Transitions have deeper implications than the annoyance of interrupting daily activities because it may cause the other person to change their evaluation of their partner (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). In other words, a romantic partner may just be annoyed outside of a transition, but during one it could also change how they feel about being in the relationship, as well as how they feel about their partner. With a new understanding of relational uncertainty and partner interference, the focus will turn to relational turbulence.

### **Establishing Turbulence**

In order establish turbulence within the model scholars have used a variety of methodologies. Solomon and Knobloch (2004) asked participants to self-report in a cross-sectional survey design to understand how individuals in romantic relationships (91% dating and 93% heterosexual) evaluate irritations. To strengthen the claims made by RTM, Theiss and Solomon (2006) use a Web-based survey to collect longitudinal data from participants who self-reported about the directness of communication regarding

irritations from a romantic partner for six weeks. Other methods used were laboratory participant observations of the communicative interactions between romantic couples in relationships for an average of 1.17 years (McLaren, Solomon & Priem, 2012).

Qualitatively, Knobloch and Delany (2012) used a thematic analysis to understand turbulence, relational uncertainty and interference in discourse samples from online forums about depression. They used two criteria for selection: (a) one or both partners was suffering from depression symptoms, and (b) the text discussed relationship issues.

The combination of relational uncertainty and partner interference make up relational turbulence. Relational turbulence is “people’s propensity to be cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally reactive to interpersonal situations that would be nondescript in ordinary circumstances” (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012, p. 425). Relational turbulence is a period of turmoil that can exist in a variety of contexts in which the relationship is unstable and partners are more likely to be reactive to each other (Knobloch & Theiss). When an individual's actions are in direct or peripheral violation of relationship norms, an expectancy violation has occurred (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). These violations, per Burgoon (1993), have been known to cause disruptions in romantic relationships and alter evaluations of the other person, which can lead to an unstable relationship. Relational turbulence can increase the negative valence of expectancy violations (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012).

Like turning-points, these disruptions and altered relational evaluations could be defined as relational turbulence or the degree of the relationship to be in flux (Knobloch, 2007). Others have thought of relational turbulence as a kind of cognitive bias impacted by levels of uncertainty and interference from a romantic partner (Knobloch & Theiss,

2010; Theiss & Nagy, 2012). It is important to note that increased reactivity to relational uncertainty and partner inference occurs at moderate levels of intimacy (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007). This may mean that couples at the beginning of a romantic relationship are more accommodating in the early months of a relationship with their partner's turbulent behaviors, because emotional attachment has not developed (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). However, as the intimacy increases and the couple begins to interlock their lives, turbulent behaviors cause increased reactivity, due to the increased opportunity to disrupt or interfere in the daily life of the other person (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Similarly, couples who have established interdependence (often a sign of increased intimacy) may also be more reactive during times of transition (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b). Increased reactivity leads to the discussion of potential outcomes of relational turbulence, highlighted below.

### **Implications of Turbulence**

**Irritations.** It is reasonable to assume that most couples are going to irritate each other at some point in time to some extent. However, when individuals in turbulent relationships responses were compared to those not in turbulent relationships, the results indicated that similar stimulants (e.g., being insensitive, constant teasing) were exaggerated and more harmful to those in a turbulent relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). During turbulent times, even mild irritations (e.g., being indecisive) can be perceived as more severe (Theiss & Solomon, 2006). Previous research suggests that there is a curvilinear relationship between negative appraisals and intimacy (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Simply put, as intimacy increases so does the perceived negativity of irritating behaviors by a romantic partner but the negativity

plateaus at moderate levels of intimacy. By intimacy I mean physiological or emotional connection, but as previously stated, a perception of interconnectedness.

Research suggests that relationships will often experience more negative appraisals at moderate levels of intimacy because of the increased interference and relational uncertainty individuals experience (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). An appraisal is an evaluation of the other person. Negative appraisals indicate a decrease in one partner's value of the other person or relationship. In other words, a person may start to dislike their romantic partner because of an increase in negative emotions during turbulent times (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). An example of this is when a new-mother may not be getting enough sleep and is irritated because she feels that her partner is not helping enough with the kids. Another example could be an out of work husband complaining about having to do most the housework while their partner works full-time. Under non-turbulent conditions or in the middle of a period of calm in the relationship, neither of these situations may lead to increased stress and decreased liking; however, during a turbulent period of the relationship the implications are more severe. In addition to irritating behaviors, experiences of hurt may lead to reactivity of a romantic partner.

**Hurt.** Intentional or not, sometimes individuals say or do something that hurts their significant other. Like irritations, hurtful actions can be intensified during times of turbulence and affect other areas of the relationship, such as: directness of communication and perceived negativity (Theiss & Solomon, 2006b). Turbulence in a romantic relationship has also been found to affect the intensity of hurtful experiences, perceived intentionality of the hurtful act, and increase the effects of the hurtful act on the relationship (Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009).

The intensity of a hurtful experience can be conceptualized as the degree to which one person acted in a way that made the other feel emotional pain (Theiss et al., 2009). How hurtful an act/message is to another person depends on a variety of aspects, such as the person you are speaking to and that person's worldview. The model does not argue that acts become re-evaluated in terms of hurtfulness due to turbulence, but that they are intensified. For example, calling a significant others opinion irrational would still be more negative than forgetting to tell the same significant other good morning, but the intensity of both are amplified during a transitional period.

Intentionality can severely impact a relationship if one partner believes the other is trying to hurt them. When a hurtful act or message is not thought of as an accident, the degree of hurt is perceived as higher (Theiss et al., 2009). For example, name-calling is an intentional act that can be used to hurt someone and may have lasting effects on the relationship. Within the context of RTM, the model suggests that intentionality can be linked to relational uncertainty (McLaren et al., 2012).

Hurt could also affect an individual's perception of the romantic relationship (McLaren et al., 2012). When an individual is in a relationship that they feel needs to be repaired or that intimacy needs to be restored, it could be based on a recent change or transgression (i.e., turbulence). Like situations involving irritations, a romantic partner may perceive an action or comment as more hurtful than they would otherwise if the relationship is in a transition period (McLaren et al., 2012). For example, if a spouse comes home after living away for a period and the other plans a surprise party, but the party is not appreciated, it may be more hurtful because of the long-distance nature of the relationship and the accompanying turbulence.

**Sexual Activity.** Theiss and Nagy (2010) found that turbulence negatively effects a partner's sexual satisfaction, cognitions, and emotions. Interestingly, they also found reciprocal effects of relational dissatisfaction to negative cognitions and emotions on relational turbulence. In other words, the two variables, relational characteristics (i.e., relational uncertainty and partner interference) and emotional and cognitive reactions to sex, function to impact the other. For example, partner interference can lead to sexual dissatisfaction or negative thoughts and emotions about sex can lead to relational uncertainty. Perceptions of sexual activity and the way people view help from others can be effected by turbulence within the relationship.

**Support from Others.** Perceived network involvement is a person's view of the way that close friends and family members behave and help or hinder their romantic relationship (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). Because perceptions of network involvement have strong ties to relationship success and stability, it is important to understand perceptions of network involvement in connection to relational turbulence (Felmlee, 2001). Perceptions of network involvement have been found to change with a couple's level of intimacy (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). In a similar fashion to perceptions of hurt, the strongest results were found at moderate levels of intimacy. This means that as couples experience moderate levels of intimacy and turbulence at the same time, their perceptions of support from others is increasingly negative (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). One possibility for this perception is the increased volatility of communication and emotions during transitional periods (Knobloch, 2008b; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004). In addition to altered perceptions of support from others, individuals may also experience increased negative emotion (Knobloch, 2008b).

**Negative Emotions.** Fear, jealousy, sadness, and anger are negative emotions that individuals can experience during their romantic relationships and research suggests that relational turbulence shares a positive correlation with these negative emotions (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). As the RTM argues, individuals in transition experience relational turbulence and as a result can experience a range of negative emotions (Knobloch et al., 2007). Changes in the romantic relationship lead to the possibility of a partner interfering in the daily activities or needs of the other and a partner experiencing relational uncertainty.

As previously noted, stress can have both mental and physical health implications. According to Priem and Solomon (2011) relational uncertainty Solomon (2011) significantly impacts the cortisol response to hurtful and supportive messages from a romantic partner. In their study, when individuals received hurtful messages from a partner they were uncertain about, the negative effects were perceived to be more negative (Priem & Solomon). Stress is exacerbated by relational uncertainty. These experiences can lead to different negative emotions based on the context of the turbulence. For example, if one member of the relationship withdraws and avoids with issues the other person can experience increased levels of stress marked by increased levels of cortisol (King & Theiss, 2016). This research is important because couples that are about to enter or are currently going through a transition may benefit from this information. Taking specific steps before or during a turbulent relational event may help to maintain the health of the relationship by preventing or at least limiting uncertainty and interference. Now that the implications of turbulence are understood, we move to the contexts to which RTM has been applied.



## **Applying the Relational Turbulence Model**

No couple is immune from the possible effects of relational turbulence. The world we live in is in constant flux and when situations change problems can arise. Relational turbulence has been found in a variety of contexts: irritations in dating romantic relationships (e.g. not picking up dirty clothes) (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), hurtful acts by romantic partners by (e.g., name calling) (McLaren, Solomon, & Priem, 2011), Military couples transitions after deployment (e.g., a spouse getting used to the other being gone) (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011), changes in geographic distance (Ellis & Ledbetter, 2015), and becoming empty nesters (Nagy & Theiss, 2013), just to name a few. As each of these contexts are described with greater detail it will become clearer that RTM is useful in predicting relational conflict. Previously we have discussed the tenants of RTM and the implications of turbulence. The applicability of the model grows as researchers continue to example the contexts that RTM is used to analyze. The following contexts are reviewed to give a picture of the current state of RTM research, starting with relationship escalation. See Table One (Appendix A) for a full review of shows the wide range of work that has been studied within the frame of RTM..

**Relationship Escalation.** The original context for the RTM was Solomon and Knobloch's (2004) study of casual dating relationships transitioning into a serious relationship. In this study, they identified two main factors for turmoil or turbulence to occur, relationship uncertainty and partner interference. The process of escalation can create turmoil because of the uncertainty associated with the relationship. In this development stage a relationship, Solomon and Knobloch found that as intimacy increases so does turbulence. However, this trend does not continue indefinitely.

Turbulence peaks at moderate levels of intimacy (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004).

This interesting finding explains the more accommodating behaviors in the initial stages of a relationship. Individuals are less likely to be confrontational as they are getting to know the other person, (i.e., the honeymoon stage). As intimacy increases so does interdependence and the potential for interference.

Additional research on relationship escalation used longitudinal data over the course of six weeks and found that changes in levels of intimacy are associated with changes in relational uncertainty and partner interference (Solomon & Theiss, 2008), which is consistent with initial research to formulate RTM (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Solomon and Theiss found that high relational uncertainty was associated with low intimacy and that relational uncertainty was reduced when intimacy increased (2008). On the surface these results may seem like a significant problem for the credibility of the RTM. However, when the specifics of the research design are taken into consideration the results are more consistent. For example, the data collected in both studies suffered from recall bias but the Solomon and Theiss (2008) study asked questions about the previous week versus the general perceptions of a partner. This is important because in initial stages of the relationship it is possible for one couple to have low uncertainty because intimacy has not developed and expectation of increased intimacy may be low as well. On the other hand, it is also possible to have high uncertainty because intimacy has not developed yet and there is a hope to further that relationship.

This transition to a more serious relationship can, at times, be rather difficult as both positive and negative outcomes can occur (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004). The positive outcomes could include help with daily tasks, such as transportation or cooking

meals. Alternatively, negative outcomes could include interference in time spent alone or with friends. “Disruptions are frequent during this time of transition as partners learn through trial and error how to participate more fully in each other’s routines” (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004, p. 125). This is the process of interdependence. Another context of studied within the frame of RTM is long distance relationships).

**Long Distance Relationships.** Is a relationship doomed to fail if it is a long-distance relationship? The short answer is, it depends. Ellis and Ledbetter (2015) found support of RTM in their research of long distance romantic relationships in which couples are potentially more satisfied because of less partner interference. When couples are geographically further apart they engage in less relational maintenance communication (Ellis & Ledbetter, 2015). Less relational maintenance leaves room for romantic partners to be more independent. Couples do use a variety of communication tactics (e.g., e-mail, texting, sharing on social media) to keep the romantic relationship going from a distance, but it is less time specific. In their study, Ellis and Ledbetter (2015) found that geographic distance between partners reduced partner interference and communication reduced uncertainty. Couples who spent time communicating, (e.g., talking on the phone) had less relational uncertainty and therefore less relational turbulence. Couples who face a change in the relationship and must prepare for a period of long distance should maintain contact to preserve the relationship. They must also prepare for the turbulence that may occur due to interference once they are reunited. Another way in which this has been studied is in the context of military couples.

**Military Experiences.** One specific instance that may be a catalyst for relational turbulence is when military families adjust for reintegration after deployment.

Deployment has been heavily studied within the frame of RTM (Cox & Albright, 2014; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013; Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2015; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011, 2012; Parcell & Maguire, 2014; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013, 2014). While the RTM is grounded in relational transitions, it is also applicable to military reintegration and helps explain uncertainty and interference between military couples.

The post-deployment transition can lead to questions of relational uncertainty and periods of partner interference, specifically when depression is considered (Knobloch et al., 2013; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). In this time of reintegration some couples experience difficulties with conflict, communication and autonomy (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). In this context, the person returning home from the deployment and the spouse that remained in the home may have similar or completely different expectations about communication, division of labor, sexual behavior, and parenting following the deployment (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011, 2012, 2014). In addition, the degree of interdependence may shift greatly, especially with long deployments (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011, 2012). These different expectations have been shown to lead to relational uncertainty (i.e., being unsure about the relationship) and partner interference (i.e., being prevented from accomplishing tasks by the other) (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012, 2014).

While some couples felt closer following the deployment or no change in the relationship, a portion of the individuals questioned in multiple studies experience turbulence due to idealized conceptions of what reintegration would be like (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011, 2012). There are unique questions related to relational uncertainty for military couples, (e.g., rejoining family life, personality changes, and fidelity), which can

be seen in these studies on RTM. Military family, like other families, also experience interference from their partner in many areas (e.g., chores, parenting, social activities, quality time). Not only do physical actions lead to uncertainty and turbulence but communicative responses are also connected to levels of turbulence within a relationship (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). Their findings establish communication as the channel through which turbulence, uncertainty, and interference is experienced (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). Specifically, the tone of a conversation is an important factor along with the amount of communication. Theiss and Knobloch suggest that communication programs for service members should include coaching on both content and tone as part of their interactions. Information that was concealed during deployment may need to be discussed in order to facilitate openness and transparency in relational communication among returning service members and their significant others (Knobloch & Theiss).

It is logical to think that more satisfied couples would be able to withstand the challenges associated with military deployment. However, Theiss and Knobloch (2014) found that because highly satisfied couples are not accustomed to challenges within their relationship they are more susceptible to the negative realities of military deployment. Additionally, increased relational uncertainty can lead to increased topic avoidance (Knobloch et al., 2013). Personal feelings and military mission experiences are potential topics that military members may choose to avoid after a deployment (Parcell & Maguire, 2014). It is important to note that research suggest that it is the time after the deployment and the “honeymoon” phase is over that the relationship is most at risk for relationship dissatisfaction and turbulence (Parcell & Maguire, 2014; Theiss & Knobloch 2013).

In addition to romantic relationship challenges for services member, there are

additional challenging aspects to turbulence when children are considered (Knobloch et al., 2015). For example, children of deployed service members are aware of the impact of the deployment on their caregiver. Knobloch et al., (2015) found that children face increased responsibilities, changes in daily routines, missing family transitions, emotional turmoil (p. 335). Going forward, scholars working with RTM should provide information specific to military families on how to recognize turbulence and signs of uncertainty and interference to help cope, while also exploring other careers that may be connected to relational turbulence (e.g., high-travel jobs).

**Physical Health.** Changes in an individual's health can lead to both interference from partners' and relational uncertainty. RTM can be used to better understand the changes a relationship faces when a partner or actor must deal with new medical problems. When it comes to physical health concerns, RTM has currently been applied to breast cancer (Weber & Solomon, 2008), infertility (Steuber & Solomon, 2008), and HPV (Harvey-Knowles & Faw, 2015).

Breast cancer can create both interference and uncertainty in romantic relationships (Weber & Solomon, 2008). Having breast cancer or being a breast cancer survivor is a new identity that individuals are faced with and can create feelings of self and partner uncertainty. As couples consider treatment options in this transitional period of their relationship, increased relationship uncertainty arises and potential interference can occur. In line with the RTM, Weber and Solomon (2008) found that information management surrounding breast cancer can be a cause of both uncertainty and interference.

When someone goes through breast cancer they experience changes to their body that may interfere with the daily life of their romantic partner (Weber & Solomon, 2008).

A woman's ability to cope with and manage her cancer can be interfered with by both a romantic partner and family members (Weber & Solomon). Insecurities may develop over the course of a cancer treatment that interfere with the sexual activities of the relationship and this could directly interfere in the needs of a romantic partner. Also, sexual activity can be a source of turbulence because each partner has individual needs and they may be unsure how to approach the new situation, given perceived and actual physical constraints (Weber & Solomon, 2008). Both relational uncertainty and interference were found to be on the minds of breast cancer patients and impacted their ability to cope with the cancer (Weber & Solomon, 2008). In addition to breast cancer, women may also face a concern when it comes to their fertility.

Following a battle with infertility relational uncertainty and interference may become salient. Steuber & Solomon (2008) found that relational uncertainty was related to implications of blame and interference from a partner and occurred when expectations of infertility treatment were violated. Interestingly, the results revealed that interference and uncertainty may not be two completely distinct constructs but interdependent (Steuber & Solomon). For example, feeling of relational uncertainty followed a romantic partner's interference in the other's desire for (Steuber & Solomon).

While previous research has focused on interference (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004) or uncertainty (Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988; Priem & Solomon, 2011), it may be important to study these two variables simultaneously (Knobloch & Delany, 2012; Nagy & Theiss, 2013). Individuals experienced uncertainty when they were unsure of their partner's commitment to the relationship and the importance of fertility treatments (Steuber & Solomon, 2008). This uncertainty produced negative emotions like anger,

blame, and sadness (Steuber & Solomon, 2008). Couples experienced interference when one partner believed the fertility treatments should take priority over other relational goals like careers or sexual intimacy (Steuber & Solomon, 2008). In addition to infertility and breast cancer, HPV is the final context that has been reviewed in relation to RTM and physical health.

Harvey-Knowles and Faw (2015) analyzed communication following an HPV test from the perspective of RTM. Their study supported the tenants of RTM by finding that when an actor found their partner to hinder their goals (i.e., interference), they reacted negatively. Specifically, partner interference predicted negative responses (e.g., expressing anger or dissatisfaction) to a romantic partner (Harvey-Knowles & Faw, 2015). In somewhat of a contrast to the model, Harvey-Knowles and Faw (2015) found that the results of a turbulent event vary based on relational uncertainty, partner interference, and how reactivity develops over the entire course of the transitional event. In short, they found that both positive and negative communication could come from a transition in a relationship based on the way couples communicate. This is one way to continue to explore and expand on RTM in the future, as much of the research assumes negative outcomes. Similar to physical health issues, RTM has also been applied within the context of mental health.

**Mental Health.** “Depression is a widespread and potentially incapacitating mental illness that can have grave consequences for the well-being of individuals and their relationships” (Knobloch & Delaney, 2012, p. 750). The two major tenants of RTM, uncertainty and interference, were prevalent in the online discourse of individuals dealing with depression. This study reviewed openly available information in online forums.



Individuals were not prompted or censored in any way and the descriptive statistics for the participant population was not available because the study only looked at public information. The results from this study revealed that an individual's level of uncertainty can be about themselves, their partner, or both (Knobloch & Delaney, 2012). For example, an individual may feel increased relational uncertainty if their significant other interferes with their plan or goals for treatment of their depression (Knobloch & Delaney, 2012). The change in perception of how the other person feels about them based on a disagreement about mental health can lead to relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Delaney, 2012).

As noted previously, military families are particularly susceptible to mental health challenges, such as, depression, PTSD, and other traumatic brain injuries (Cox & Albright, 2014; Knobloch et al., 2013; Knobloch et al. 2015; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). These mental health challenges can be viewed through the RTM and this could lead to more effective mental health interventions. As military families prepare for, deploy, and return home, they face challenges with communication (i.e., interference) and commitment (i.e., uncertainty) (Cox & Albright, 2014). Specifically, Cox and Albright found that depression and anxiety are associated with turmoil, interference, and uncertainty (2014). Therefore, communication scholars have a vital role in suggesting new psycho-education interventions for those who are facing relational transitions. In addition to the mental health challenge associated with turmoil, new parents face a particularly difficult transition.

**New Parents.** Theiss, Estlein, and Weber found relational interference and uncertainty to be predictors of relational dissatisfaction for a couple following the birth of

their first child (2012). Theiss et al. also found that the arrival of a new baby can lead to decreased physical intimacy and increased conflict in the relationship (2012). Theiss et al.'s work supports the use of RTM as an explanation for reactivity during transitions to parenthood. In addition to relational uncertainty following the birth of a child, couples may also have to negotiate around partner interference. The birth of a child can limit either of the new parent's daily activities and goals. For example, it becomes more difficult to spend time alone together, to keep the house clean or to go out with friends. Interestingly, research has documented this relational transition as the transition unfolded (Theiss et al., 2012). Unlike other studies, this extension of RTM is a context in which the participants were gathered *prior* to the transition and did not rely on participants' memory of past accounts to confirm the claims of RTM (Theiss et al., 2012). Another frame of reference related to children is when they are old enough to move out, often known by its transition phase name: the empty nest.

**Empty Nesters.** The stage of marriage when all the children have moved out of the house and the parents once again live alone is often referred to as the empty nest phase (i.e., in a positive light) or empty nest syndrome (i.e., in a negative context) (King & Theiss, 2016). Couples have a variety of new decisions to make and new expectations of their spouse in this season of life that can lead to increased or decreased relationship satisfaction depending on how the transition is managed. King and Theiss (2016) found that physiological changes occur in the body during times of turbulent transition (e.g., the empty nest). As couples renegotiated their daily life after the children moved out, the stress on the relationship became problematic (King & Theiss, 2016).

With the focus of the family shifting from the children to each other, there is

renewed opportunity for interference. In this transition, irritating behaviors and common misunderstanding can lead to increased levels of conflict and stress (King & Theiss, 2016). Also, uncertainty was found to be associated with communication behaviors such as, indirectness, topic avoidance and withdrawal (King and Theiss, 2016). Couples who experienced increased uncertainty were less likely to talk about sensitive issues (King and Theiss, 2016). Another important expansion of RTM has been into comparisons across cultures.

**Cross-Culture Assessments.** RTM has also been supported in two cross-cultural studies comparing American dating college students and South Korean dating students (Theiss & Nagy, 2012; 2013). Cross-cultural RTM research has focused on turmoil, topic avoidance, partner responsiveness and relationship talk. No difference was found between the Americans and the South Koreans accounts of increased relational uncertainty with increases in intimacy (Theiss et al., 2012, 2013). One goal of this study was to test the reliability of RTM outside of the United States. However, partner interference was not supported as a variable as a predictor of turbulence in the South Korean test, this is potentially due to the collective culture of this society (Theiss & Nagy, 2012). The findings of Theiss and Nagy's study disagreed with previous studies in that it did not find relational uncertainty to predict perceptions of turmoil in both models (Knobloch, 2007; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). It should be noted as scholars continue to expand RTM that collectivist and individualist cultures have different perceptions of turmoil, conflict, and transitions (Theiss & Nagy, 2012; 2013). It was also found that South Koreans are more sensitive to uncertainty in their relationships (Theiss & Nagy, 2013). Again, this speaks to the differences in cultures that need to be explored in future

research.

Theiss and Nagy (2013) found that when both American and South Korean relationships are in flux relational partners are less likely to talk about the status of their relationship because they are worried about doing more harm than good. People care about the outcomes of their relationships but sometimes fear that communicating about the relationship may increase the problems within the relationship. Interestingly, individuals are more motivated to resolve conflict based on partner interference, but talk about the conflict more indirectly when it is based on relational uncertainty (Theiss & Nagy, 2013). This might suggest that individuals that are committed to the relationship are not worried that engaging in conflict will lead to dissolution of the relationship. However, couples who are uncertain of the relationship may be less likely to actively communicate about their needs because they are not sure what the outcome would be.

Cross-cultural studies are important for extending the usefulness of the RTM outside of the United States to a broader global perspective. It will be important to take note of individualistic and collectivist cultures and the results of their studies because cultural differences may impact the outcome of interpersonal relationships. Also, collectivist subcultures exist in the United States and this would help increase the impact of RTM globally. The final context in which RTM has been applied in research is a recent study on late-life parental divorce, the first study to extend RTM beyond romantic relationships.

**Late-Life Parental Divorce.** Divorce is a specifically applicable transition for both the individuals involved and their immediate families. RTM has been expanded to apply to adult children's experience of parental divorce (Mikucki-Enyart, Wilder, & Hayden,

2017). While relational uncertainty and partner interference have their foundations in romantic relationships, (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017) found similar relational uncertainty and partner interference in the experiences of adult children whose parents divorced. Relational uncertainty was applied to parent-adult children relationships, uncertainty about the divorce, and uncertainty about being a family. Interference was described as feeling caught and maintaining family connections, for example: relaying messages between parents or having moral objections to one parent's behavior (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017). While RTM originated in the context of dating relationship escalation, expanding RTM to other relationships can add credibility to the overall value of RTM if they are found to hold true. As new contexts are added and older contexts are confirmed, the model will continue to grow in educational value. It is also possible that the claims will not hold true across different types of relationships but those findings will help refine our understanding of RTM going forward

## **Chapter 3 - Future Directions**

Despite the relative youth of the RTM as a communication model, relational turbulence has been studied from many different angles and research methods. However, there are ways to improve and expand the model that would add value to the theoretical and practical applications by casting a wider net as scholars continue to work on RTM. In the following sections, theoretical directions for future work are proposed as well as practical expansions of the model to assist individuals outside academia.

### **Theoretical Directions**

In terms of the theoretical aspects of RTM, it is essential to expand the theorizing of the relational turbulence model in more contexts. The origins of the RTM are rooted in the development of romantic relationships (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). The future of relational uncertainty should explore the possibility of not being an independent variable but as a concept interconnected with relational interference. Also, the view of the tenants of RTM as broad all-encompassing terms needs to be explored because research continues to add nuance to our understanding of the terms, Mikucki-Enyart et al. have conducted research regarding adult child-parent relationships and this expansion moves the current understanding of relationships between family members forward (2017). Future research should continue to specify context and types of interference and uncertainty. For example, family contexts in consideration of a loved one passing away, parental divorce at various stages in life, or even remarriage. Relational context needs to be considered more specifically to give a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of partner interference and relational uncertainty. Specifically, the types of interference and how people communicate about those interferences. Both relational experiences and

relationship transitions should be considered in future RTM research. Again, RTM has been studied from many different perspectives with all different methodologies and because of the benefits of each, scholars should continue to use both qualitative, quantitative methods, and even rhetorical methods. In pursuit of a deeper understanding of human communication patterns it is important to continue to look at transitions from longer longitudinal time frames, and specific moments in time. Future research should also continue to expand into different contexts of relationships, like cultural differences, family transitions, and the experiences of college graduates moving back home. In addition to the cultural differences the model could explore more relational transitions, such as, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or career and education changes.

Theiss and Nagy (2013) just scratched the surface of the potential for RTM to be applied across cultures. As the world becomes more global and technology continues to bring people closer together, people may begin to experience more conflict along cultural lines. RTM could explore romantic relationships that cross cultural boundaries. Studies could focus on the transitional experiences of international students living in a new country. The communication patterns and expectations of the student's home country may impact how they make friends and form relationships in other countries. The model could also be expanded to include relationships that transition into living in a new culture. For example, when military families are stationed in Japan or other countries. Changes people face and their reactions are impacted by their world view. Cross-cultural RTM research could expand into countless areas of life. Such as, adding more to our understanding of the impacts of medical diagnoses would be helpful.

Breast cancer and HPV have briefly been studied in terms of relational uncertainty and interference but it would be interesting to know if these results hold true for other medical issues (Harvey-Knowles & Faw, 2015; Weber & Solomon, 2008). For example, how would the findings change or stay the same for men with life altering cancers? Does medical turbulence impact family members or what are the results of self-inflicted health problems like a smoker getting lung cancer? Health communication is a growing area of research that could contribute a lot to the application of RTM. Grief is another area that could be further developed. The transitional time following the death of a romantic partner's parent or the death of a child could be further developed. Depression and anxiety are especially difficult to deal with during times of transition (Knobloch & Delany, 2012; Knobloch et al., 2013). It is important that negative emotions, positive emotions and resilience are studied in conjunction turbulence, conflict, and stress. As RTM grows it should aim to be as inclusive as possible. It is the applicability of the RTM that makes it so valuable.

A growing phenomenon that needs more attention from communication scholars is the transition from college back into the family home. In addition to other contexts outside of romantic relationships, the transition back into the family home could potentially cause conflict for both the parents and the children. According to Fry (2016) living arrangements for young adults are changing. A switch from living with a romantic partner or roommate, to living at home with parents, is currently more common for young adults ages 18-34 than ever before (Fry, 2016). This can have implications for relational uncertainty and interference because family members will need to renegotiate the rules and their roles. For example, after moving away for college, students have the freedom to



stay out as late as they want, go to parties when they want, and wake up at their own pace. This freedom may or may not be acceptable to parents and could cause friction in the household. Parents and adult-children may second guess the decision and experience uncertainty or interfere with the daily goals of the other (interference).

Both negative emotion and goals are an important area to expand on.

Interference occurs because one party blocks another from reaching their goals (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Goals can be about issues like money, education, relationships, or careers. Scholars should work to understand the differences, if any, that exist about goals. For example, does the interference of goals related to money have a different impact on relational communication than goals related to health during a relational transition? The exploration of goals could lead to a better understanding of the model and help individuals maintain health relationships. In the pursuit of helping people build and maintain relationships, it is vital to understand infidelity. The connection between turbulence and infidelity could give new insight into relationship uncertainty and interference. It could also lead to a new way of looking at infidelity and what causes it. As the scope of RTM expands from romantic relationships to family systems the concept of being caught in the middle warrants further attention (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017). Family dynamics and family communication may also experience turbulence as individuals work together to make choices and plans.

### **Methodological Application**

Dyadic considerations are another important area of expansion for RTM. Most of the research using RTM is about romantic couples and the responses of one member of the relationship. Comparing both individual's responses who are in romantic relationship

or other types of relationships could give greater nuance to the turbulence they experience. Gathering and analyzing data from both parties of a relationship could enhance the current understanding of how relational uncertainty and partner interference function together. Another task is to track individuals before, during, and after a turbulent transition. Increased lengths of longitudinal data could give a more precise picture of turbulence. It is arguable that the macro concepts of RTM are clear but the micro instances are less detailed.

### **Practical Application**

In more practical terms, RTM can also be useful prior to transitions to inform and educate individuals about what they should expect from the transition they will soon face. This information, in conjunction with the knowledge of an expected transition, would allow couples, parents, and family members to prepare for the challenges associated with transitions. Specifically, educating couples on how to have difficult conversations prior to transition may help to limit the effects of relational uncertainty and inference. Familiarity with RTM can help those going through transitions better manage their expectations. However, preparing for a transition is not always possible and in some cases people will need to respond during or after a transition has occurred. The culmination of RTM research suggests that increased knowledge of the transition for everyone involved can help to mitigate the impact of the transition (Theiss & Knobloch, 2013). Applicable suggestions from studies include: preserving daily routines, focusing on positive outcomes by reframing from a negative to positive perspective, and maintaining open lines of communication (Knobloch et. al., 2012, 2013, 2015; Theiss & Knobloch, 2013, 2014). The results of these studies would be useful for educators and practitioners to

create workshops and/or classes to help normalize the feelings individuals will experience when relationships are in flux.

Conversations about conflict may be difficult but asking many questions will help to reach a better understanding of the issue. Sometimes people are reluctant to disclose information but RTM communication training could help those involved be more aware of how the other person is feeling and why they are reactive. Another option for having a difficult conversation is to bring in a trained mediator. Mediators help to facilitate conversations that may be difficult for people to have on their own.

The application of RTM can be applied broadly in two categories: One, the individuals going through the transition, and two, those who are peripherally connected to the couple. The peripheral sphere could include doctors, therapists, and the social network of the members.

Currently, families, couples, and individuals can seek support during times of transition from a variety of sources that may include: formal military support before, during, and after deployment, counseling and medical services for couples dealing with infertility, and informal groups on social media. For example, people who are struggling with depression or their partner is battling depression may seek support from a group online. One potential for RTM research to be applied specifically in these settings is through relationship education. According to a meta-analysis of 117 marital education studies (MRE), “MRE is in the range of effects for other valuable prevention programs” (Hawkins et al., 2008 p.728). Comparable programs included maternal sensitivity training, adolescent pregnancy prevention, alcohol and drug abuse prevention and stress management (Hawkins et al., 2008). The current research on MRE suggests that these

education programs do have positive impacts on relationships, specifically communication between those in romantic relationships. Adding RTM to these programs MRE programs could strengthen their effects. Halford, Sanders and Behens (2001) found positive results for high-risk romantic couples who went through relationship skills training when compared to a control group at both one and four year follow ups. Again, this speaks to the necessity of these programs and how adding RTM information could improve romantic relationships. As policy-makers at both the state and federal level look to fund prevention programs, they should consider the impact of turbulence found in RTM research (Hawkins et al., 2008).

Scholars, clinicians, and individuals who work with or face transitions that may cause turbulence need to remember that turbulence is not an outcome variable. For example, it is understood that relationship satisfaction is important for the long-term success of a relationship. Relationship satisfaction is an outcome variable to be achieved. With that, stress is understood to have a physiological impact on the body and mind. Stress in relationship is an outcome to be avoided. However, turbulence is going to happen and the management of the turbulence is what matters. Like conflict, turbulence is not inherently negative but passively ignoring it will not make it go away. Through open and honest communication about the needs of everyone involved in the conflict, RTM may help to mitigate the negative impacts of turbulence on the relationship.

## **Chapter 4 - Conclusion**

The Relational Turbulence Model (RTM) provides an insightful lens for examining relationships in flux, from romantic relationships to family systems (Ellis & Ledbetter, 2015; King & Theiss, 2016; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002, 2004; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Weber & Solomon, 2008). This body of research indicates that relational uncertainty and partner interference shape the way individuals respond and communicate about conflict in their relationships. This is useful for those who experience turbulence to recognize the potential interactions that may occur during transitions within romantic relationships.

After providing a framework for the RTM, this literature review proceeded to unpack the relationship characteristics that manifest from relational turbulence. Finally, the multitude of contexts in which RTM has been applied were discussed. While existing research provides a foundation to better understanding interpersonal relationships, there are more contexts and directions to explore. These include: relationships that occur later in life, associations between communication behaviors and physiological effects, negative emotions, health diagnoses, changes in family dynamics, and military deployments (King & Theiss, 2016; Knobloch et al., 2012; McLaren et al., 2012; Steuber & Solomon, 2008).

The value in studying conflict through RTM is the potential to change the outcome of relationships. Money does not cause problems, but the interference in financial goals of a romantic partner can cause conflict. Changes in relational dynamics can lead to relational uncertainty. It is through the expansion and understanding of RTM that interpersonal skills can be improved and relationships maintained. If everyone deals with

turbulence, from dating to marriage, health complications, divorce, and the empty-nesters, understanding and studying turbulence is vital to expanding our field.

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## Appendix A - RTM Studies

**Table 1.** Overview of Studies Using RTM

Characteristic	Number of Studies	Number of Participants
Study Characteristics		
<b>Publication Year</b>		
2000-2009	18	1,645
2010-2017	29	10,044
<b>Publication Type</b>		
Article	53	
Handbook	4	
<b>Research Method</b>		
Quantitative	27	
Qualitative	8	
Mixed Methodology	N/A	
Not Applicable	22	
<b>Research Focus</b>		
Uncertainty	34	
Interference	1	
Not Applicable	22	
<b>Support for the Model</b>		
Yes	55	
No	0	
Partial	2	
<b>Participant Type</b>		
Students	10	
General Population	15	
Military	6	
<b>Relationship Type</b>		
Dating	10	
Married	3	
Romantic	20	
Children	1	
Not Applicable	23	